

Emphasizing Comprehension: Flex and True/False Questions

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One way to keep comprehension first and foremost in the minds of the students is to have them answer flex and true/false questions based on new vocabulary items and grammar structures that appear in the curriculum.

Flex Questions

The following flex question is based on the word *crowded*.

1. The bus was very *crowded*.

T F a. There were few passengers on the bus.

T F b. There were many passengers on the bus.

T F c. There were hardly any passengers on the bus.

T F d. Most of the seats were unoccupied.

T F e. Most of the seats were occupied.

The students read the numbered statement first and then decide whether the lettered statements under it are true or false based on what the numbered statement says. If a lettered statement is false, the students must say what is wrong about it or how it can be made right.

Flex questions are particularly good for testing comprehension of grammar structures, as the following question illustrates.

1. *If Ali hadn't had a flat, he wouldn't have been late to work.* (conditional #3 / the past conditional)

T F a. Ali had a flat on the way to work.

T F b. Ali didn't have a flat on the way to work.

T F c. Ali got to work on time.

T F d. Ali got to work late.

T F e. Ali was late because he had a flat.

True/False Questions

These are similar to flex questions except that each lettered statement is answered true or false on its own merit.

1. a *system* (noun) [countable]

T F a. The lights on your car are part of the fuel system.

T F b. The gas tank in your car is part of the electrical system.

T F c. The parts of a system work together.

T F d. The parts of a system are indep-endent of each other.

T F e. If one part of a system fails, the other parts aren't affected.

2. *more/less + long adjective + than . . .* (compare)

T F a. A quiz is more important than a test.

T F b. A bicycle is more expensive than a car.

T F c. A village is less crowded than a city.

T F d. A wild animal is usually less dangerous than a tame one.

T F e. Words are more powerful than weapons.

I try to make the last lettered statement of a true/false question as interesting as possible. Proverbs and famous quotations often incorporate the target vocabulary item. Such statements are usually of high interest to the students and often require extra time for explanation, appreciation, discussion, and debate.

The following are some statements that have resulted in good discussions. The word for which the statement was written is in parentheses.

T F e. Your wife is your property. (property)

T F e. Three men can keep a secret if two of them are dead. (secret)

T F e. Speech is silver but silence is gold. (silent)

T F e. Neither a borrower nor a lender be. (borrow)

T F e. Camels can swim. (swim)

The last item, curiously enough, has proven to be the most controversial of them all and is something I still argue endlessly about with the students.

Recycling

It is vital that a flex or true/false question for a new vocabulary item or grammar structure use only previously presented vocabulary and grammar. Once a word or structure has been introduced, however, it can and should be used in the context of new items.

The following question, based on the word visible, recycles previously presented vocabulary, the comparative, and the structure *so + adjective + that . . .*

1. (*be*) visible (adjective); visibility (noun) [uncountable]

T F a. When something is visible, you can see it.

T F b. When it is foggy, visibility is good.

T F c. Visibility was so bad that the plane could take off.

T F d. It's safer to drive when visibility is bad than when visibility is good.

T F e. On a clear day, Bahrain is visible from Al-Khobar.

Thereafter, visible is used when the following vocabulary items are introduced.

T F a. Visibility increases at night. (for *increase / decrease*)

T F a. Fog and rain limit visibility. (for *limit*)

T F a. When you conceal something, it isn't visible. (for *conceal*)

T F a. Although the position was camouflaged, it wasn't visible. (for *camouflage*)

T F a. Internal injuries are visible to the eye. (for *internal*)

This recycling ensures that students have not one but many opportunities to see a word or construction in many different contexts. This promotes acquisition.

Concepts

It is productive and beneficial to think about vocabulary and grammar structures in terms of some important concepts. Listed below are statements for the word book. Following each statement, in parentheses, is the important concept that the statement exemplifies.

- T F a. A book has one cover, two titles, a few pages, and a stomach. (description / parts / attributes)
- T F b. A book is for reading. (function / use)
- T F c. You open a book before you start reading. (sequence)
- T F d. A book is a dictionary. (classification)
- T F e. It's a good idea to borrow books from the library and sell them. (ownership)
- T F f. All books are interesting. (scope)
- T F g. Libraries generally contain few books. (quantity)
- T F h. We have enough books; we need some more. (sufficiency)
- T F i. Most people store their books in the refrigerator. (location)
- T F j. It usually takes a day to write a book. (time)
- T F k. The book read Ali. (case)
- T F l. Most people read a book once every minute. (frequency)
- T F m. Books have caused more harm than good. (opinion)
- T F n. You can't tell a book by its cover. (metaphor)
- T F o. A paperback book is more expensive than a hardcover. (comparison)
- T F p. Ali is studying his book in order to fail the test. (purpose)
- T F q. Ali didn't understand the book, so he failed the test. (reason / cause / result)
- T F r. Although he read the book, he passed the test. (contrast)
- T F s. If Ali hadn't read his book, he would have passed his test. (hypothesis)
- T F t. Before a test, you should play loud music instead of studying your books. (modality)

T F u. Ali will pass his test if he doesn't study his book. (condition)

T F v. You usually read a book carelessly. (manner)

T F w. You can write a book on a computer. (means / instrument)

An important benefit of writing statements with these concepts in mind is that, over a period of time, students acquire not just vocabulary, but the way in which these concepts can be expressed.

Conclusion

Flex and true/false questions are beneficial for the following reasons:

1. Students learn English in English instead of through translation.
2. Old vocabulary is constantly recycled and reviewed in the context of new vocabulary.
3. Grammar is considered from the point of view of comprehension.
4. Students get constant exposure to how important concepts are expressed.

I have written well over 2,000 flex and true/false questions to support our curriculum here. The questions have been printed into books which have been distributed to the students, and they have also been typed onto disk for use in the computer lab.